

## Bennett Fears 'Public Policy Disaster'--It's Already Here by Milton Friedman

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### Letters to the Editor

William Bennett is entirely right (editorial page, Sept. 19) that "there was little, if anything, new in" my open letter to him, just as there is little, if anything, new in his proposed program to rid this nation of the scourge of drugs. That is why I am so disturbed by that program. It flies in the face of decades of experience. More police, more jails, more-stringent penalties. increased efforts at interception, increased publicity about the evils of drugs-all this has been accompanied by more, not fewer, drug addicts; more, not fewer, crimes and murders, more, not less, corruption, more, not fewer, innocent victims.

Like Mr. Bennett, his predecessors were "committed to fighting the problem on several fronts through imaginative policies and hard work over a long period of time." What evidence convinces him that the same policies on a larger scale will end the drug scourge? He offers none in his response to me, only assertion and the conjecture that legalizing drugs would produce "a public policy disaster"-as if that is not exactly what we already have.

Legalizing drugs is not equivalent to surrender in the fight against drug addiction. On the contrary, I believe that legalizing drugs is a precondition for an effective fight. We might then have a real chance to prevent sales to minors; get drugs out of the schools and playgrounds; save crack babies and reduce their number; launch an effective educational campaign on the personal costs of drug use-not necessarily conducted, I might add, by government; punish drug users guilty of harming others while "under the influence"; and encourage large numbers of addicts to volunteer for treatment and rehabilitation when they could do so without confessing to criminal actions. Some habitual drug users would, as he says, "continue to rob and steal to get, money for clothes, food or shelter." No doubt also there would be "a black market to undercut the regulated one"-as there now in bootleg liquor thanks to high taxes on alcoholic beverages. But these would be on a far smaller scale than at present. Perfection is not for this world. Pursuing the unattainable best can prevent achievement of the attainable good.

As Mr. Bennett recognizes, the victims of drugs fall into two classes: those who choose to use drugs and innocent victims who in one way or another include almost all the rest of us. Legalization would drastically reduce the number of innocent victims. That is a virtual certainty. The number of self-chosen victims might increase, but it is pure conjecture that the number would, as he asserts, skyrocket. In any event, while both groups of victim are to be pitied, the innocent victims surely have a far greater claim on our sympathy than the 'self-chosen' victims-or else -the concept of personal responsibility has been emptied of all content.

A particular class of innocent victims generally overlooked is foreigners. By what right do we impose our values on the residents of. Colombia? Or, by our actions undermine the very foundations of their society and condemn hundreds, perhaps thousands of Colombians to violent death? All because the U.S. government is unable to enforce its own laws on its own citizens. I regard such actions as indefensible, entirely aside from the distortions they introduce into our foreign policy.

Finally, he and I interpret the "Founders' view of our system of government" very differently. To him, they believed "that government has a responsibility to ... help educate citizens about right and wrong." To me, that is a totalitarian view opening the road to thought control and would have been utterly unacceptable to the Founders. I do not believe, and neither did they, that it is the responsibility of government to tell free citizens what is right and wrong. That is something for them to decide for themselves. Government is a

means to enable each of us to pursue our own vision in our own way so long as we do not interfere with the right of others to do the same. In the words of the Declaration of Independence, "all Men are ... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights. that among these are Life, Liberty. and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights Governments are instituted among Men. deriving their just powers from the consent of the Governed." In my view, Justice Louis Brandeis was a "true friend of freedom" when he wrote, "Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government's purposes are beneficial. Men born to freedom are naturally alert to repel invasions of their liberty- by evil-minded rulers. The greater dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well meaning. but without understanding."